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AUTHOR Obiakor, Festus E.
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines problems faced by youngsters at risk of failure in school, and discusses methods for helping them succeed in educational programs. At-risk youngsters confront many problems in school and in mainstream society, and are frequently misidentified, misdiagnosed, and improperly instructed. Problems faced by at-risk youngsters include: (1) the prevalence of single-parent households; (2) child abuse and neglect; (3) poverty and poor nutrition; (4) drug abuse; (5) complications of teenage pregnancy; (6) divorce and family breakdown; and (7) poor self-esteem. School-related problems faced by at-risk youngsters include the use of standardized tests, negative assumptions about them by society, and a lack of multiethnic education. Society's response to these multi-dimensional problems has often been a plethora of studies that blame families and the children themselves for children's poor progress in school. To successfully deal with these problems, however, federal, state, and local governments need to develop strategies to enhance healthy child development, and teachers must be willing to manipulate their instructional environments to address the needs of all students. Both teachers and social service providers must redefine their assessment, placement, and instructional strategies. Contains 34 references. (MDM)

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At-Risk Youngsters: Methods That Work

Festus E. Obiakor, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Special Education
Henderson State University
Arkadelphia, AR 71999-0001
(501)246-5511, Ext. 3437

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Abstract

At-risk youngsters confront a myriad of problems in school programs and the mainstream society. The response to their multidimensional problems has been in the way of reports and studies which have tended to blame for the society's problems. These reports have stressed excellence and quality in education with little response to equity and inclusiveness. In the midst of this transition are cries and yearnings for practical programs tailored to meet the special needs of at-risk youngsters. Existing programs have been ineffective. Old ideas (e.g. traditional identification, assessment and instructional programs) are continuously challenged; and new ideas are modified. This paper addresses methods that work with at-risk youngsters in educational programs.

At-Risk Youngsters: Methods That Work

Education, historically, has been called to effectively respond to social, economic, cultural and political problems (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986; Committee for Economic Development, 1985; Holmes Group, 1988; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Unfortunately, many schools have not responded to the needs of at-risk youngsters to the greatest possible extent. It is no wonder that reforms and reports repeatedly come in different ways without respect for circumstances and "real" solutions. Many scholars and educators (Cuban, 1990; and Obiakor, 1991, 1992) noted that practitioners have difficulty implementing policies with right solutions. For instance, Cuban wondered whether we are "dealing with the problem or the politics of the problem" (p.6). At-risk youngsters are frequently misidentified, misassessed, misdiagnosed and misinstructed. This trend has continued even though these students are expected to survive in today's changing world. This paper addresses methods that work with at-risk youngsters in educational programs.

Who are At-Risk Youngsters?

It is apparent that public education has not responded to the needs of those youngsters who do not fit into the traditional categories of exceptionalities--these nontraditional students are at risk of succeeding in school and in life. Who, then, are at-risk youngsters? According to Clark (1988); Davis and McCaul (1990); Ornstein and Levine (1989); and Pallas, Natriello, and McDill (1989); at-risk students have indicators which include (1)

minority racial/ethnic group identity, (2) poverty household, (3) a single-parent family, (4) a poorly educated mother/father/guardian, and (5) a non-English language background. Clark had observed that "the bulk of young people who are at risk are subjected to psychological genocide" and "robbed of self-esteem and the capacity to achieve" (p. iii). In fact, most at-risk students "fall into the mode of learned helpessness" (Lovitt, 1991, p. 387) when programs are inappropriately designed to address their special needs. Baer (1991) explained:

> We need to understand who these kids are. They have potential; however, they don't know it. They need what we all have to offer, but they won't believe it. In a way, they may want to fail because there is a kind of comfort in that. After all, it's what they know best. Failure is a restful place to be. Nobody bothers them much because they can't be expected to give or participate ... The crucial point to remember is that in spite of all these obstacles, these kids have all the potential that other kids have. (p. 25)

Baer's comment demonstrates that at-risk youngsters are not well-understood by professionals who work with them. It has two basic implications. First, nontraditional identification, assessment and instructional strategies are needed to ameliorate multidimensional problems of at-risk youngsters. Second, unwarranted suppositions about at-risk youngsters by professionals do not assist these youngsters in becoming productive members of school and society.

There are <u>global</u> problems that face at-risk youngsters in today's society. Obiakor (1990, 1992a, 1992b), and Shoaf (1990) noted that these problems include (a) prevalence of single-parent families or families without "father" figures, (b) alarming rate of child abuse and neglect, (c) unending economic and social pressures

on parents, (d) gang-banging and rampancy of drug abuse, (e) poor nutrition as a result of poverty, (f) preponderance of teenage pregnancy or "Babies" having babies, (g) disturbing rates of misery and suicide, (h) alarming rate of divorce or family breakdown, (i) selfishness and "me-first" syndrome, and (j) negative perception of less fortunate, disadvantaged, and helpless individuals as socieconomic liabilities. According to Shoaf (1990), "many children today struggle to cope with a world more uncertain and more frightening than ever before " (p. 13).

Coupled with these global problems are specific school-related and/or programmatic problems which challenge at-risk youngsters. They include (a) the theory of biological determinism which subscribes to the principle that "worth can be assigned to individuals and groups by measuring intelligence as a single quantity" (Gould, 1981, p.20); (b) the use of standardized instruments as solutions (rather than as ingredients) for classification, categorization, and placement (Anrig, 1985; Hilliard, 1989; Ogbu, 1988); (c) the negative perceptual assumption that they have "low" or "negative" self-concept because they are experiencing failures in school programs (Obiakor, 1990, 1992b; Obiakor & Alawiye, 1990; Obiakor & Fowler, 1991); (d) the insufficiency of realistic role models or teachers who understand their cultural values and learning styles (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1987; Harvey & Scott-Jones, 1985; Obiakor & Barker, 1990; Staples, 1984); (e) the lack of multiethnic education to foster cultural acceptance and diversity (Banks, 1986;

Gay, 1988); and (f) the myth of socio-economic dissonance, ie. poverty means "poor" culture, "poor" values, "poor" morals, "poor" behaviors, "poor" zest for learning, and "poor" intelligence (Prater, 1991).

Global and specific problems confronting at-risk youngsters indicate that schools, agencies, institutions, States and the federal government must design proactive programs to reach all youngsters, especially those who are at risk. These youngsters are not beyond redemptions--they have minds that are not tabula rasas.

The "Band-Aid" Phenomenon

Raver (1991), Smith (1989), and Widerstrom, Mowder and Sandall (1991) recognized the role played by the federal government to institute early intervention programs. In 1965, the government funded Project Head Start to help "preschool children from low-income families to overcome the effects of poverty on their development and on their school achievement" (Widerstrom, Mowder & Sendall, 1991, p.4). About three years later, the 1968's Handicapped Children's Early Education Program (HCEEP) (Public Law 90-538) was established to provide seed-money for exemplery research/programs for young children. This effort continued until in 1975 when the Education of All Handicapped Children Act-Public Law 94-142) was instituted to provide education in a least restrictive environment for students from 3-21 years. This law was amended in 1986 (Part 11 of Public Law 99-457) to educate youngsters from birth to 5 years of age and their families. In

1990, another amendment (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act-Public Law 101-475) was signed into law to educate youngsters in an environment that maximizes their potential. These federal legislations have been intended to reduce problems confronting at-risk youngsters (e.g. in preventive, services, tracking and monitoring, parental training and involvement, and integrating support systems). Unfortunately today, the education of young children has become a political football. Few months ago, the Family Leave Bill proposed by the Congress was vetoed by President George Bush because of its presumed effects on small and large companies.

State agencies and public schools have continued to "jump" on the federal band-wagon with regard to the educational of at-risk youngsters. Many model programs have been established for comprehensive competencies and programs related to the child, family, agency and school. However, funding still remains a major impediment. Sadly, Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSP) are still not seriously pursued to tackle the unique needs of all children and families. Raver (1991) revealed that "the shortage of trained infant interventionists, physical and occupational therapists, and speech therapists is expected to continue into the next decade" (p.21).

In 1990, Hayes, Palmer and Zaslow summarized the findings of a panel of experts in their book, Who cares for America's children: Child care policy for the 1990s. They indicated that America's children are not getting the deserved care from all quarters. This

panel of experts arrived at seven general conclusions which Hamburg (1990) reiterated below:

1. Existing child care services in the United States are inadequate to meet current and likely future needs of children, parents, and society as a whole.
2. A large number of children are now cared for in settings that neither protect their health nor offer appropriate developmental stimulation.
3. Child care has become a necessity for the majority of American families irrespective of family income.
4. Arranging quality child care can be difficult, stressful, and time-consuming, especially for low-income families, public policies therefore should give priority to the economically disadvantaged.
5. There is no single policy or program that can address the child care needs of all families and children.
6. Responsiblity for meeting the nation's child care needs should be widely shared among individuals, families, voluntary organizations, employers, communities, and all levels of government.
7. Child care policies should affirm and support the role and responsibilities of families in childrearing. (p.9)

From the above conclusions, it is apparent that at-risk youngsters are still encountering multidimensional problems in America today--this "band-aid" phenomenon will continue until practical methods are pragmatically pursued.

Methods That Work

The impact of federal legislations on the education of at-risk youngsters cannot be underestimated. However, the federal government needs to develop strategies to enhance healthy child development. According to Hamburg (1991), these strategies should provide needed elements of family support through (a) enriched parental care, (b) preventive care in the first few years (c) dealing with child injuries, (d) developing solid child care programs, (e) building parental competence, (f) developing social

support services, (g) supporting families with adoloscents, and (h) developing life skills training programs. Hamburg added that "there is much that can be achieved if we think of our entire population as a very large extended family - tied by history to a shared destiny and therefore requiring a strong ethic of mutual aid" (p.19).

The state government should as well be committed to reduce (if not eliminate) the plight of at-risk youngsters. Widerstrom, Mowder and Sandall (1991) suggested a comprehensive system which should incorporate:

1. A definition of the term, developmentally delayed.
2. Multidisciplinery evaluation of the functions of all eligible children and the needs of their families to assist in their child's development.
3. An individualized family service plan for all eligible children and their families.
4. A comprehensive Child Find system which includes primary referral sources such as hospitals and day-care providers.
5. A central directory of resources available in the state for early intervention services.
6. A comprehensive system of personnel development, including preservice and in-service training for providers, and establishment of standards for their certification or licensing.
7. Procedural safeguards for the parents' right of due process (e.g., rights of appeal and confidentiality, right to examine records, communication in parents' native language). (pp. 5-6)

The teacher's classroom should play a dominant role in helping at-risk students to maximize their potential. A developmental (rather than a deficit) model should be infused in all levels of identification, assessment, interpretation, placement and instruction. Perceptions and categorizations should be reduced--the emphasis should be on measurable, quantifiable and describable

variables. Intelligence cannot be measured as a single quantity. The theory of biological determinism is archaic, and should not have a place in education today. Results from standardized tests should be ingredients and not solutions. At-risk youngsters do not have "low" or "negative" self-concept. The fact remains that their school failure might be a result of uncontrollable environmental contingencies. Teachers or role models who understand the cultural values and learning styles of these youngsters should be involved in their educational programs. In other words, programs targeted for at-risk students should (a) respond to their unique needs, and (b) respect their intra-individual and inter-individual differences. Low socio-economic background does not indicate "poor" morals, "poor" values, "poor" cultures and "poor" zest for learning.

Teachers should be willing to manipulate their instructional environments to address the needs of <u>all</u> students. They need to reward students and encourage self-responsibility when necessary. It is urgent that new directions be taken in our schools. Apparently, teachers cannot solve all of society's problems; however, they can serve as the child's advocate when parents fail.

Perspective

At-risk youngsters have continued to confront multidimensional problems despite legislative efforts in the United States. These students are not beyond redemption; and their minds are no tabula rasas. Federal, state, and local government have to be fully involved in educating these students. Teachers and service

providers need to redefine their assessment, placement and instructional strategies. Finally, all hands must be on deck in the education of at-risk youngsters in the least restrictive environment. As Hamburg (1991) succintly pointed out:

> We have to move beyond the easy and pervasive recourse of passing the buck. It is our responsibility-each individual, each institution and organization, every business, all levels of government. We cannot lose sight of the fact that wise investment in human capital is the most fundamental and productive investment any society can make. Constructive development of our children is more important than oil or minerals, office buildings or factories, roads or weapons. The central fact is that all of these and much more depend in the long run on the quality of human resources and the decency of human relations. If these deteriorate, all else declines. (p.20)

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